

## ***Mujer en la frontera de un ataque de nervios:*** **Woman on the Border of a Nervous Breakdown**

**October 28, 2005 / *Jueves el 28 de octubre***

I've been meaning to write some synthesis for the people in my life since I've not been wont to send many letters or mass emails. Instead I think I'll tell you about today. Hopefully it will put together the strands of my life here and allow for some future questions and storytelling. Also whoever you are, thank you. It is never without a lot of help that I arrive where I am and continue to sustain myself with good company and care.

Today was a full day. *Llena* like after my daily breakfast of ham, eggs, beans, papaya, juice and café. I woke up a bit drowsy from staying out salsa dancing on my birthday. My host mother, Linda, had already left for work at the maquiladora. She is a woman of Juárez, but not one of the "women of Juárez." Unlike the murdered women whose painted crosses on telephone poles line the border road, Linda has lived the very different reality of middle-class upbringing and lifestyle. She works in the payroll office at a maquila that produces products for export to Home Depots across the U.S.

While I rip myself out of bed, Carlos, my host father, prepares the kids for the day. My five-year old host brother, Carlitos, named for his father, laments as his hair is combed. Someday I'm positive he will not leave the house without his hair properly combed and gelled so that the style would survive a desert windstorm, but in the meantime he doesn't seem to like mornings or combs anymore than I do.

I sit down to breakfast while Carlitos orders leche con Nesquik and eggs with "winnie" aka hot dog. Carlos goes back upstairs to fetch the sleeping Isabela, my one-year old sister. I watched her take some of her first steps. Nowadays she has mastered "Bye," which is, by the way, the common thing to say when leaving. "Adios" is saved for funerals, I suppose. Carlos and Linda share more or less equally in caring for the children, and although I haven't seen Carlos do a dish, I think Linda is happy leaving the morning routine to him. Machismo is alive and well in Mexico and perhaps in the United States for that matter but in my family here, concern over which gender is in charge would not feed the children and therefore is irrelevant.

Since I have gotten out of the house late I am disappointed. I will not catch my friend Flor on the corner to catch the *ruta* (bus) to the bridge. Flor is a lively middle-aged divorced woman with three daughters. Every day she goes to El Paso to visit her parents and help them with odds and ends before returning to Juarez in the afternoon to go to work and then take care of her adolescent daughters. One of them will soon go to live with her grandparents to attend school in the U.S. When I ask Flor her reasons, she replies that learning English in Juarez is not the same as being immersed in the U.S. and she wants to give her daughter an advantage. "*Para que ella avance.*"

When she told me this a few weeks ago I was struck by the implications of this move. First of all, many of my Mexican or Juarenses friends are more advanced in English than I am in Spanish because they learned it from movies, television, songs, and whatever the equivalent of Sponge Bob was in their day. Juárez is not the only city of the world infused with American pop culture, but the idea that English is a foreign language seems particularly misplaced here.

The other more immediate experience that informs my concern over the move comes out of my internship at a bilingual elementary school in El Paso. Three to four days a week I go to the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade bilingual classrooms to serve as a teacher's assistant/ tutor.

The designation “bilingual” is in contrast to the monolingual or English classes. Because of the way the Texas state tests are set up, there is a significant push to have the kids transition into English, read: “the language of success.” The kids who do not “transition” out of Spanish are at a significant disadvantage as they go through the grades. In some ways, the term “bilingual” often serves as a synonym for ESL and has nothing to do with mastery of two languages. I’m not surprised therefore when Bush said a few weeks ago that the kids who were being “Left Behind” were children of those parents who refused to learn the language of this country (How dare they?). Quote: “And guess who would get shuffled through? Children whose parents wouldn't speak English as a first language just move through.”

Incidentally, Bush accidentally gave me the perfect introduction to my senior comps project on parental participation at the school. All the ways in which parents do help with their children’s education, in contrast to the narrow thinking of people who believe that if you don’t speak English you have no intention of improving yourself or your children. The American Dream, according to this mode of thinking, is not applicable to immigrants. So excuse me, Mr. President, but I do not see a group of kids being shuffled through. I see a group of kids struggling and working hard to find a place in school when learning English means an advantage and the loss of the language they were spoken to as newborns and their parents before them. Simultaneously the program is so poorly structured that the kids do not learn either language well. This only reinforces the notion of English as the language of success.

“Success” has a cost and we’d be good to acknowledge that of “these” kids and parents, many will not be sung the praises I am by Americans and Mexicans alike for learning Spanish. I have an accent and I often confuse verb conjugations, but no one cites me for being ignorant. Instead I get, “*Que bueno que sabes español.*” or my favorite from El Pasoans who are impressed that I live on ‘the other side’: “Wow. I’ve lived here my whole life and I don’t know any Spanish. That’s great. Just be safe over there, okay?”

If I seem defensive, I am. Because I’m tired of these kids bearing the brunt of accusations that they are not smart because they speak with an accent. Because I’m tired of the parent-blaming that goes on when the single act of getting to school to pick up your child involves at least an hour of waiting for the El Paso bus that never comes. Because I’m tired of impressing people for knowing another language when the children I sit after school with and tutor struggle in 2 languages but receive no such recognition.

My real blood Mom, out of pure love, worries that I am being self-deprecating when I say these things. I might have been in the past. But I’m also tired of feeling guilty. The point is to recognize that my experience as a foreigner in Mexico is always colored by my identity as a white blond middle-class American. The experience of the kids in my class in El Paso is that of *moreno*-skin-toned working-class Americans who are treated as foreign.

My proof for where I am treated as a foreigner and where I am not? In line on the Bridge every morning I am stared at by my fellow *Juarenses* but not recognized as a fellow crosser. The border Customs agents do recognize me as an American though, most especially the day I forgot my wallet *and* passport at home. I passed without any identification. There’s this obnoxious *Time* article entitled, “Who Left the Door Open?” Subtitle: “Despite all the talk of homeland security, sneaking into the U.S. is scandalously easy...” *I* say it is. In contrast I think the article was trying to portray the trek through the Sonoran desert without water, avoiding the *migra* and fences and helicopters as “scandalously easy.” Who belongs... it is all in the look.

## Thursday, November 04, 2004 / Jueves el 3 de Noviembre

I was running through the park tonight, noticing the statues that fight with the mountains for domination of the sunset skyline. The statues are of the conquistadors and monks who colonized the indigenous people. Which colonizer? It does not say, the plaques are gone.

*In 1598 Señor Don Juan Oñate came with a 4 mile caravan of 129 soldier-settlers, and 600 servants. Thirty days later he passed the “Act of Obedience and Homage” to rule over the indigenous Pueblos, Apaches, and Mansó peoples. This act gave the Spaniards the power of life and death over the indigenous. It could also be called the “Act of Submission and Possession.” After a large-scale revolt by the indigenous, in 1693 Don Diego de Vargas began the “Reconquest” of the area saying the Spaniards were only guilty of too much selfless love towards the indigenous.*

Bush was re-elected yesterday. We are all grieving. I worked on the Kerry campaign in New Mexico, my baptism to political participation if you will. On weekends we knocked on doors in Doña Ana County. I was hoping that the people I convinced to vote would not be disappointed. We spoke in Spanish about what good it does to vote. “Para que el gobierno escuche su voz.” – So that the government hears your voice. That Tuesday I went around making sure people were going to the polls. I suppose I was not the “effective machinery” the Republicans possessed, but I have no regrets because this time I tried. Now I only feel grief. Not so much over Kerry, a good man, but not someone who truly inspired me in the first place. Rather when Bush says, “America has spoken” it is not the America that includes my voice or that of the people I talked to. I know that we as a country need to democratize, we need to have debates and talk out of mutual respect, Republicans, Evangelicals, Punks, Liberals, Democrats, Neo-whosits, and New-whatsits. (By the way if you’re a Republican or any other the other categories and you take personal offense at my political opinion, remember that we’re all trying to do our best. As such, I am speaking my truth. I hope you can speak yours. Maybe we can talk sometime.)

My Mexican family says, “*Ni modo.*” Never mind. But I’m tired of never-minding. I’m impatient. But in some ways I’ve gotten exactly what I wanted. This time my privilege, my color, my background, my American citizenship, and my womanhood are not letting me off the hook. I am responsible for fighting the good fight. Our professor Gypsy wrote us a letter that broke me into tears, telling us to grieve and to hope. But we must also work. Paul Wellstone said, “The future will not belong to those who sit on the sidelines. The future will not belong to the cynics. The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” Whether or not Bush won, there was work to do. So, “*Ponte la camiseta.*” It’s time to get to work, sisters and brothers.

## Friday November 12, 2004 / Viernes, el 12 de noviembre

A few things people like to ask about are the maquilas and the ‘women of Juárez.’ First of all acknowledging that they’re not separate entities is important. The maquila industry is a huge part of the social layout that contributes, creates, and is en contra *las asesinadas*, the dead women. (If this sentence seems wordy it’s because “it is a both and kind of world” (quote from Gypsy)—I’m trying to get away from thinking in binary opposites.)

It’s not just Juárez, and neither are we to forget. “*Ni una mas*” *gritan las madres y l@s ober@s.* —“Not one more,” shout the mothers of the disappeared and the workers that assembled at the bridge to protest two weeks ago. The @ sign signifies a gender-neutral way of writing in Spanish combining the masculine ‘o’ with the feminine ‘a’. This is important

considering that a huge contingent at the protest was that of the former braceros. I told my friend Deborah who works at a labor organization in Juárez that I was surprised at the huge presence of older men at the protest, they formed at least a quarter of the numbers. She told me that many Braceros, after failing to receive their social security money and as a result of their general work experience, have joined with a number of diverse labor movements realizing they're all connected and all *chingados*. (Exploited, for the sensitive English-speaker types.)

Other factoids: although the maquila industry was supposed to serve returning Braceros it instead favors women workers because they are supposedly correlated to greater productivity, read: docility and controllability. Ironically the maquila floor also is a uniquely political environment and fosters the creation of feminist labor movements. Women maquila workers have been required to show a bloody sanitary napkin to demonstrate that they're not pregnant so that they can work for \$12 dollars for a 72-hour or more workweek. Women carry a double burden; many wake up at 4 a.m. to prepare food and prepare the family for the day before leaving for a 12-hour shift. 46% of women in the state of Chihuahua have experienced some form of violence against them.

The dead women of Juarez: "No one claims these bodies." "*Justicia, honor, y dignidad.*" Over 350. No it's not just Juárez. And there is a lot of hype and scapegoating. But the continuation of the problem is the incredible part. Who will take responsibility? It's all very complicated, the incompetence, impunity and repugnance of it all. I do not do the issue justice. I just wish you could ride the bus with me in the morning and pass the crosses with the rest of the morning commuters. We the "protected" ones, outsiders and our middle-class families fool ourselves on so many levels. It's everywhere—this monster. Domestic violence, rape. We could @ll do better as a species.

To stay sane I think about the funny little occurrences in my day: I got invited to eat *lengua* (tongue) with one of the parents at the elementary school, speaking of which my favorite spelling sentence of the day was, "What world is Sophia in?" referring to this student's friend Sophia; a good question indeed.

When the little things fail, I dance to the music on my laptop with my host brother and sister; he's particularly fond of Michael Jackson, of all things. Then after he goes to bed I listen to Silvio Rodríguez.

I meet with the rest of the group members and think about what's next for the world. We study history, which Gypsy says is a fundamentally optimistic pursuit, because it contextualizes the present. The study of history shows, "The way things are is NOT the way things have to be." Incidentally, she has a huge banner of this quote in her room to wake up to and to travel with when giving lectures on the global economy.

Last week our program had the chance to reflect as professors from various colleges visited to hear about the BSP to recruit future students at their colleges. All the students presented on their internships. We work in hospitals, midwifery clinics, law offices, women shelters, homeless shelters, youth shelters, schools, labor organizations, and other organizations all concerned with all of the above issues, all inclined to shelter the human family in some capacity. In response to the question of what kind of student should apply, there was some thought—myself included—that the student should have a predisposition to politics, until one student said, "No, anyone can be politicized, and the Border is the place to do it." Indeed, life here "reflects, reinforces and resists" the assumptions I carried. Life here is a grand intersection, like a nerve synapse, of social roles, groups, boundaries and openings. The border is obsessed with the *other* precisely because it shows us who *we* are. But *we* are much more than we sometimes allow ourselves to be. I have been more than myself lately. I

hope, sisters and brothers and amig@s, that we can all be so lucky so as to have these lessons everyday, no matter where life's classroom presents itself to us.

In Peace and Hope,

Sarah

Caddy